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A STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT REGIONALIZES

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history policies future directions spring 1976

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Prepared under the direction of Stephen S. Kaagan, Deputy Commissioner for Coordination

Produced by the Bureau of Educational Information Services Richard A. Gilman, *Director* 

Writer: Lori Aronson
Editor: Sally Gelardin
Graphic Artist: Michaela Tichy
Varitypist: Sylvia Losh

A STATE **EDUCATION** DEPARTMENT REGIONALIZES history policies future directions spring 1976

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The Massachusetts Department of Education is different from other state agencies. It does not provide direct service to its ultimate constituents — children, youth and adults — except in certain limited activities. The Department depends instead on the leadership of over 400 local and regional school districts to do the job of educating in the Commonwealth. It is this circumstance more than any other that convinced the State Board of Education that regionalization of basic Department services makes good sense.

Department staff have invested a great deal of time and energy in the last three years to make regionalization a reality. Essential from the outset was a commitment to establish the centers as places where people from local districts could obtain not only information and service, but most important, decisions on matters of significance.

We are close to meeting the original aims of regionalization: bringing Department functions and services closer to the local level, improving communication within the Department and with local districts and realizing efficiencies of operation by being able to provide more services with the same number of staff.

I look forward to joining with people from local school districts to refine further the concepts of regionalization and to see that the regional education centers serve local needs better.

Sincerely yours,

Gregory R. Anrig Commissioner

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### introduction-history

It was ten years ago that the concept of regional education centers first began to receive attention from the State Board of Education. In the ensuing years the Commonwealth has seen the centers develop from a few small outposts to a group of strong service organizations, each closely linked to its region as well as to the Department of Education in Boston.

Today there are six regional education centers. The original pilot centers in Pittsfield and Worcester have been joined by the Springfield Center, the Northeast Center located in North Andover, the Southeast Center in Lakeville, and the Greater Boston Regional Center in Cambridge. Recently, several of the centers have relocated into larger, better equipped and more convenient quarters. These moves were necessary to accommodate the marked increase in staff and expansion of service functions.

Within the Department, the centers were reassigned in 1970 to an Office of Regional Centers, headed by a full-time director within the Office of the Commissioner. The centers now work under the supervision of the Deputy Commissioner for Coordination.

Regional education centers have attracted attention and support for a very good reason. Public recognition of the need for quality education has grown. But as demand has risen, so have costs. The regional centers present an opportunity to provide services in a much more efficient and effective manner.

While the centers do not have a fiscal capability independent of the Department of Education itself, they have managed to provide many successful services and programs. Center resourcefulness and local support have proved a combination capable of producing positive results even in the face of Massachusetts' current fiscal difficulties.

Since the centers are small and accessible, they are able to assess local needs, tailor services and monitor local concerns in a way that a centralized Department cannot. By bringing the Department of Education closer to the public, the centers can more easily secure local perspectives on statewide decision-making. Each center has a functioning advisory council composed mostly of lay people. The councils meet regularly and are extremely active in the affairs of the State Board of Education.

### development of staff functions and service role

The regional centers are meant to be more than mere outstations with a non-Boston address. The centers are field offices, arms of the State Board of Education. As such one of their responsibilities is to fulfill a regulatory or monitoring role, evaluating programs and facilities based on regulations, laws and educational standards.

Center staffs recognize that assistance is a crucial component of regulatory responsibility. Efforts are made to establish and maintain an atmosphere of trust and support by coupling monitoring with offers of technical assistance. Whether needs are first perceived by the local district or by the center, the center must be able to answer with service.

#### Range of Services

Regional center staffs are equipped to provide a range of services to the public. Each staff is composed of a center coordinator, team leaders, educational generalists and specialists and support staff. Almost all areas of Department expertise are represented: curriculum services, student services, adult education, bilingual education, equal educational opportunity, occupational education, institutional schools, school building assistance, special education and school management services.

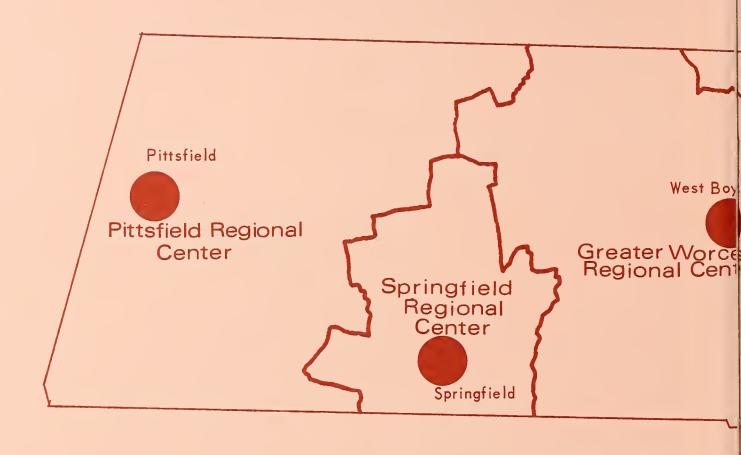
#### Staff Organization

Internal staff organization has proved to be a key to all center operations. Staff members train each other so that each has more than a nodding acquaintance with what the others do. Through a team approach used by all the centers, staff members from different bureaus are better able to provide comprehensive services to local districts. Teaming also provides back-up to each staff member to ease the transition for new staff members from large bureaucratic roles to service functions.

The urban service teams of both the Greater Boston and the Springfield Regional Education Centers are excellent examples of interdisciplinary approaches. The teams' goal is to define a systematic delivery to Boston and Springfield and to eliminate overlap and duplication among state educational agency programs.

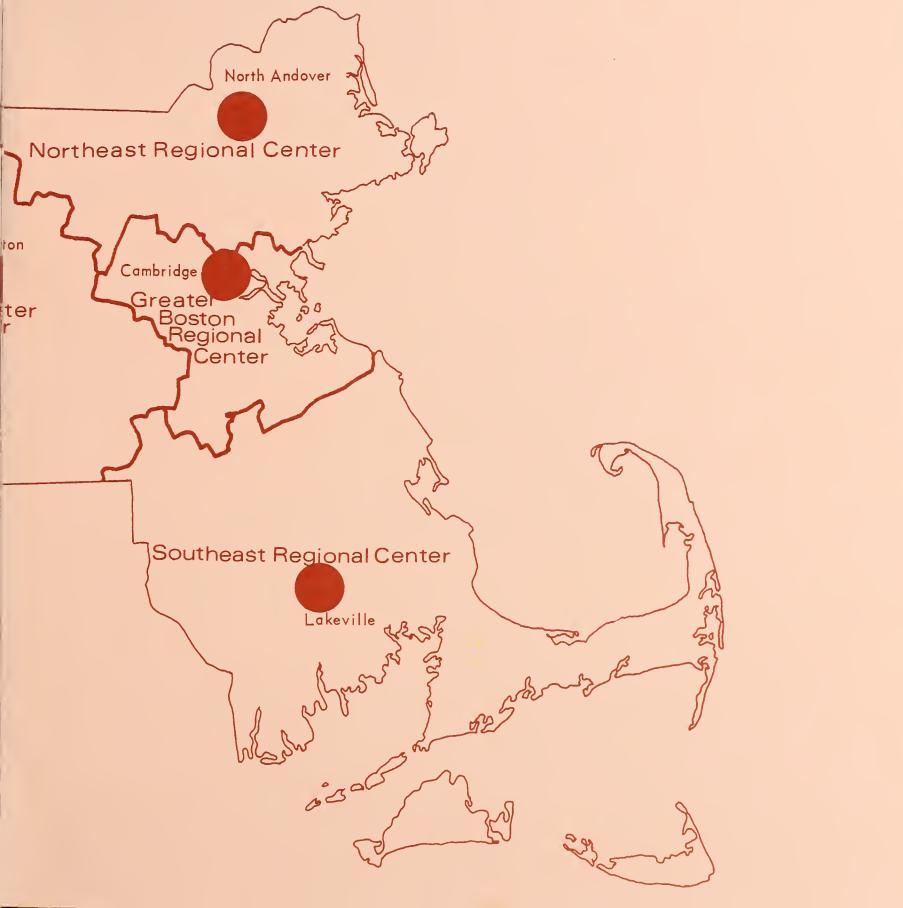
#### Kinds of Services

A center's service role is broad and varied. An estimated 50,000 people received services at the six centers in 1975. Approximately 2,500 programs and services were center-sponsored. One set of service responsibilities is tied to state demands. The central office requests a substantial amount of informa-



REGIONAL EDUCATION CENTERS

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tion from local districts such as that contained in the end-of-year pupil-financial report. The regional centers have begun to aid local districts in the collection, preparation and synthesis of this and other material requested by the Department of Education.

In-service training for professionals and paraprofessionals is an important center function, broadened by staff expertise and contacts with outside agencies such as businesses and colleges. The Administrator and Teacher Training Project, a cooperative effort of the Greater Boston and Northeast Centers, is evidence of the potential for center work in this area.

The regional centers act as repositories for shared equipment and perform housing functions for the activities of collaboratives, lay organizations and local colleges. A class for severely handicapped children, operating in conjunction with the West Boylston public schools, is held at the Greater Worcester Center. The Southeast Center houses a media center that provides educational tapes and films to local schools.

Outside contacts with colleges, industry and other state agencies, puts a center in the position of resource linker. It is this fact that has perhaps the greatest ramifications for both the centers and their

constituents. Most services can be provided more inexpensively and effectively if done on a regional basis, using the centers as an initial base.

With the help of the Pittsfield Center, for example, a cooperative venture for computer-aided instruction has developed. Taking advantage of federal funds, Berkshire Community College purchased a computer which is now linked with area high schools. Each high school has a coordinator, each of whom meets monthly with regional center staff. Center expertise was critical in the initial stages of this undertaking, but it now operates with a much lower level of center participation.

Curriculum development, a vital component of center service, involves the dissemination of materials and teaching approaches appropriate to an area's instructional needs. While the centers may not yet be able to provide complete information banks for local teachers and administrators, the level of staff expertise and other available resources is increasing.

Information dissemination and collection also occurs in a two-way flow between a center and its local districts. The centers facilitate the flow of information among constituent districts. Because of contact and smaller size, the centers can personalize interaction with local districts, and become the vehicle for local views and concerns to be passed on to the central office.

# relationship between central office and regional centers

In the attempt to bring services closer to local districts, Department organizational relationships have had to be carefully defined. Over one third of the Department's professional positions and almost all operational or service functions have been assigned to the centers. The lives of the "two-thirds" remaining in Boston could not help but be greatly affected by this transition. As a result a great deal of effort has gone into mapping out the new roles and responsibilities to be undertaken by the central office and regional center staffs.

#### Responsibilities

Central office units have final responsibility for planning leading up to and stemming from state Board of Education priorities as well as for year-by-year budget planning. They also evaluate the outcomes of Department efforts and periodically monitor regional staff activities. The central office units provide appropriate support and staff training related to program areas, make legal determinations and assure, with staff assistance from the centers, compliance with state and federal law.

Regional centers have responsibility for operational functions such as reviewing project grant proposals and overseeing and providing assistance to local districts on all education aid programs. To this end, they monitor local educational efforts supported by state or federal funds and arrange in-service training for local school personnel. In addition, the centers provide information to and obtain reactions from local school districts.

#### Roles

Perhaps the most frequent and critical contact between the centers and the central office occurs at the level of center coordinator and bureau director. This is the point at which the two parts of the organiza-

tion join on an operational basis. Educational specialists, while members of the center staff, are also under the purview of their respective bureaus. The center coordinator is responsible for determining regional staffing pattern needs, conducting individual position planning and overseeing conditions of employment.

The bureau director carries out transfers from the central office to the centers. In the case of new staff selection, the bureau director is responsible for the final screening, interviewing and selection of candidates — all of this with the participation and approval of the center coordinator.

Finally, the goal setting process involves the educational specialist, coordinator and bureau director working together to reach an agreement on the specialist's duties and responsibilities, anticipated new duties and plans for the specialist's position.

Staff development responsibilities are shared. The bureau director is charged with assessing needs, developing training plans, and conducting and evaluating training programs in those areas that relate to the bureau specialty. The regional coordinator carries out the same process in areas pertaining to the specialist's work as a member of the center team.

The Board of Education expects the regional centers to fulfill an innovative and catalytic role. To that end it provides the centers with resources and organizational support. This support is backed by the centers' authority to recommend grant awards in various program areas and the ability to provide technical assistance.

The centers, for their part, must guard against the danger of becoming regionalized mini-bureau-cracies. As regionalization continues to grow, new structures, roles and expectations will emerge in the relationship between the central office and the centers.

# joint ventures

The regional centers are in a prime position to improve and increase educational services through cooperative efforts with collaboratives, institutions of higher education, and business concerns.

#### Collaboratives

Often a local district cannot afford, on its own, to provide children with highly specialized educational services. Both in urban areas and areas of sparse population, the operational base needed for such services can only be achieved through the cooperative efforts of several districts. The voluntary collaborative movement promises to enhance opportunities for all children by producing tangible educational advantages.

The Massachusetts Department of Education has pledged its support for educational collaboratives through an increased and formalized use of the regional centers. The centers can identify areas in which collaboration can improve services within a region, then assess resources, benefits and drawbacks and act as bases for planning and cooperation among local districts.

In many instances, centers have taken the initiative, withdrawing as the collaborative begins to operate independently, yet maintaining close ties with the fledgling organization. The degree of interaction between a collaborative and a center may vary. Project ERR (Educational Redirection and Recycling) is a staff development collaborative of about 30 school communities housed at the Southeast Center. ERR began with state and federal support, but is now completely supported by funds from local school districts. In addition to housing the project, the center provides staff assistance on all ERR programs.

In the Northeast region, a number of districts are served by MEC (Merimack Educational Center), a comprehensive educational collaborative. MEC has its own quarters, but many of its operations are coordinated with the Northeast Center, as well as with Salem and Fitchburg State Colleges.

#### Colleges and Universities

One of the Centers' most important contributions is the organization of training programs. In this area, colleges and universities have an abundance of subject area expertise. The centers, in turn, can provide

advice to higher education on local school needs and possible new directions for training. For example, a joint venture has already been developed between North Adams State College and the Pittsfield Center. Together they run workshops in curriculum development and plan changes in inservice training programs.

The centers will play an active role in changes to come with the implementation of Chapter 847, the new certification law. Some Worcester area schools will benefit from other kinds of university resource, students. In return for academic credit, graduate students from Worcester Polytechnical Institute are participating in a metrics transition program.

#### Industry

Local industry can offer both advice and more concrete forms of support. Many businesses have occupational training, information films and equipment that could be loaned to centers or to local schools. Industry has already shown a willingness to assist in developing and housing day or evening courses. The computer training workshop conducted by Western Electric is part of the Northeast Center's effort to improve area schools' computer utilization.

The Springfield Regional Education Center brings schools and labor closer together through its support of the Industry Education Labor Council. Their goal is to develop career and vocational curricula which reflect area market and industry needs.

Inservice training for administrators can be enhanced by the inclusion of local management expertise. The Central Massachusetts Employers Association offered, free of charge, a three-day workshop on 'management by objectives' for 24 local superintendents at the Worcester center. The possibility is also being explored of having the centers act as a resource in locating jobs for work experience programs in the schools.

There is limitless potential in establishing relationships with other agencies. Since local districts do not have the necessary time or contacts, the responsibility for developing such ideas rests with the regional centers.

### future directions

Together, the central office and regional centers will search out new approaches and solutions to problems in the years to come.

Perhaps the most promising area for regional education center involvement will be in the development, monitoring, strengthening and guidance of the voluntary collaborative movement. Regional centers can perform a monitoring function by assuring that similar services are not duplicated within a region, that services complement state policy, and that they cannot be better performed by the district themselves.

The centers can also provide technical assistance for new collaboratives. They can help to locate staff with management expertise, or perhaps coordinate training sessions to acquaint collaborative personnel with the region. The centers can act as liaisons among the collaboratives in the various regions by spreading information and putting new collaboratives in contact with older, proven operations.

Most important, the centers can actively encourage the formation of multi-purpose, rather than special purpose, collaboratives. Guiding a special purpose collaborative's evolution into a multi-purpose role might yield higher returns for the energy involved than starting a completely new collaborative. The centers might also explore the possibility of encouraging the participation of private schools, colleges and non-school agencies in the collaboratives.

Any change in the fiscal capability of the regional education centers would involve a major departure from current practice. The most prominent possibility would be to enable the centers to receive and

disburse funds independently of the Department. This would give the centers greatly increased flexibility in money matters. Such a change would have to take place if a decision were made to build a system in which local districts could buy into the centers for services. In this type of an arrangement, the districts would pay for services received on a pro-rata basis. It is possible, however, that the collaboratives may remain the most efficient way to provide services beyond those already available in the centers.

Regardless of fiscal capability, a budgetary change worth some attention would be to give each center a pool of consultant funds. This would open up the opportunity for centers to engage people on a temporary basis. Further it would allow for the employment of people from local school districts for specific functions (with, of course, the consent of the school committee and local superintendent.)

Finally the service role could be expanded in several directions. Centers could find additional ways to broaden the base of those served to more than school personnel. They could, for example, serve as a link between local legislators and their constituencies in matters regarding education.

Innovative approaches in staff relations might be tried on a regional basis. Creative staff-sharing is an example. Centers and local districts could exchange staff members temporarily as a means to give participants a new perspective on each other's roles. Centers could also facilitate staff sharing among member districts, at the teacher level particularly. Finally regional center staffs might participate in sharing programs with state college personnel, or members of other state agencies as well.

### for further information

#### OFFICE OF REGIONAL CENTERS

John Kearney 182 Tremont Street 12th Floor (617) 727-5706

### GREATER BOSTON REGIONAL CENTER

Louis Amadio Regional Coordinator 54 Rindge Avenue Extension Cambridge, MA 02140 (617) 547-7472

### GREATER WORCESTER REGIONAL CENTER

John Collins Regional Coordinator Beaman Street Route 140 West Boylston, MA 01583 (617) 835-6266

#### NORTHEAST REGIONAL CENTER

Thomas Passios Regional Coordinator 1551 Osgood Street North Andover, MA 01815 (617) 687-3351

#### PITTSFIELD REGIONAL CENTER

Thomas White Regional Coordinator 188 South Street Pittsfield, MA 01201 (413) 499-0745

#### SOUTHEAST REGIONAL CENTER

E. Curtis Hall Regional Coordinator P.O. Box 29 Middleboro, MA 02346 (617) 947-3240

Location: Lakeville State Hospital Route 105

Lakeville, MA 02346

#### SPRINGFIELD REGIONAL CENTER

Edward Sheldon Regional Coordinator 2083 Rooseve!t Avenue Springfield, MA 01104 (413) 734-2167



Massachusetts Department of Education Bureau of Educational Information Services 182 Tremont Street Boston, Massachusetts 02111

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